

## Written evidence from Nahamu [HBA0031]

### **What forms of violence against women and girls are motivated by so-called honour? Are these different forms understood by the Government, police and other agencies?**

[Our position paper on forced marriage, published in 2022](#), explains the different forms in which forced marriage is practised in parts of the UK Jewish community. Children in these parts of the community -both girls *and* boys- have no model for marriage other than arranged marriages, which will typically take place between the ages of 17 and 20. In some Charedi families, meeting more than one or two prospective matches is considered immodest, there is an expectation that only one very short (half hour) meeting will take place before the wedding, and no meetings are allowed between the engagement and the wedding. Marriage in this way is presented as the only acceptable and legitimate way to graduate into adulthood and independence. Nahamu argues that some religious schools and other community organisations take part in what amounts to a grooming process that culminates in forced marriage, by reiterating a single honourable model of marriage in lessons, extracurricular activities, and the internal community media, and by shunning and excluding community members who do not comply. For example, students at schools would be invited to participate in the weddings of their very young teachers but would be forbidden from attending and are unlikely to even hear about the wedding of anyone who did not meet their spouse in the approved way. Grooming begins in infancy and continues through KS5. Children and young people entering these marriages under the circumstances described rarely protest. We argue that this is often because they are prevented from understanding that any other option exists. Further, we question whether, given the profound and deliberate denial of knowledge relating to sexuality and sexual consent available to the children and young people involved, anyone can give informed consent both to the marriage itself, and any subsequent sexual relationship.

The use of contraception requires a rabbinic dispensation, almost always only given in 6-month increments, and usually only after having given birth to both a son and a daughter. This restriction, combined with the early age for marriage (usually around the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, although sometimes before), and the lack of secular education, (particularly for boys), means that by the time young people enter adulthood, they are already married with several children. This means that their ties to the community are then bound up with their own young family, and it can be very hard thereafter to achieve personal autonomy.

The cover up of sexual abuse of both boys and girls, and the cover up of domestic violence are also motivated by concepts of honour and shame. In evidence given to IICSA, Jehudah Baumgarten at the UOHC testified that modesty and chastity are seen as protective factors against abuse. We argue that the corollary of this statement is true for many victims of sexual and domestic abuse; when it occurs, victims are viewed as immodest and unchaste. [Evidence given by the foster carer Mrs S in JvB and the children](#) describes the shunning experienced by children who report sexual abuse.

There is no shortage of evidence about the prevalence of this sort of community-based coercive control and so-called honour-based abuse. However, local authorities with large Jewish communities do not engage well on these issues. There is a tendency to engage, not directly with members of these communities, but instead with a small number of 'gatekeepers', who carefully control and limit what information is provided to public officials. There is very little pushback from those officials when community leaders deny concerns relating to sexual autonomy and consent. Public information campaigns that are designed to educate and advise vulnerable people about their rights

are not directed to, and do not permeate the parts of the Jewish community where these rights are not understood, and no alternative community specific campaigns have been delivered. Heavy reliance on third sector organisations, generally controlled by prominent figures within Charedi communities, to deliver health and social care inside the Jewish community means that neither messages from central and local government, nor the underlying ethos of those messages, are transmitted.

Across central and local government, there is preference for commissioning 'by and for' services, which (justifiably) epistemologically privileges 'lived experiences' as a means of co-producing, or co-designing services. Services designed in this way are intended to be more culturally competent with a view to elevating and supporting otherwise unheard voices and improving front line policy and practice.

However, the efficacy and success of services designed in this way are dependent on not only accessing, recruiting and retaining community partners, but really knowing who they are recruiting as partners. In the case of the Charedi community, there is heavy reliance on the same, or a variety of linked organisations who provide this cultural competency. In effect, this means that information about HBA in the community is mediated by 'gatekeepers'; who are easiest to access, but privilege the knowledge, experience, and opinions of the most powerful members of communities – predominantly male voices, or token, pre approved female voices. This means that the State then risks inadvertently replicating and reiterating the very risks it seeks to reduce.

### **How prevalent is honour-based abuse? What do we know about the background or characteristics of victims and perpetrators?**

In our experience, so called honour-based abuse is most prevalent within Charedi parts of the Jewish community, and within that, Chasidic parts of the Charedi community are discernibly more rigid and strict in beliefs around shame and honour. It is important to appreciate that Charedi and Chasidic Jews are far from monolithic. To avoid making assumptions about the beliefs and experiences of a large group of individuals, we think it is appropriate and helpful to identify the institutions and the vehicles that are the sources of harm, as a way of identifying the wider networks, pressures and influences that support and crystallise the beliefs held by perpetrators of HBA. For example, identifying schools, synagogues, or an ecclesiastical court (Beth Din) that distribute material, invites speakers, or have membership rules that draw on concepts of shame and honour as a way of engaging or excusing crimes such as forced marriage, physical, sexual or psychological abuse. Great care should always be taken to address and stop harmful practices at source, rather than by making generalisations about large communities of people, which may be inaccurate.

Whilst both girls and boys, as well as women and men, can both be impacted by the issues described above, it is our position that after reaching adulthood in the Charedi community, men generally have more autonomy than women, and in accordance with research into other communities, we believe that overall, abuse motivated by so-called honour is most often directed at women. The verse '*all of a princess's honour is internal*' from Psalms (45:14) is often quoted by communal authorities as a way of directing women and girls to uphold expectations of chastity and modesty and avoiding anything that would expose them to publicity or external scrutiny.

### **What is known about abuse practised under the pretext of upholding cultural norms? Is there available data and/or research on the prevalence of these practices?**

The experience of HBA is often blurred with cultural expectations that people have of conservative religious communities. Otherwise well-trained professionals sometimes adopt a painfully dismissive attitude of ‘it’s normal for them’, excusing child marriage, forced marriage, reproductive abuse and other harmful cultural practices<sup>1</sup>. Experiences of individuals in Charedi communities are not well represented in available data, because research access is often negotiated with and controlled by community gatekeepers<sup>2</sup>.

Nahamu has been raising awareness of forced marriage since 2019. Since then, there has been some acceptance within the VAWG sector that this is an issue that is underreported<sup>7</sup> and under researched in these communities, but there has been no successful work undertaken to address it by service organisations.

Case study: Research was commissioned by NHS Salford Clinical Commissioning Group<sup>3</sup> to assess the health needs of Salford Jewish communities. The researchers and commissioners agree not to use certain terms, so that censors will allow the questionnaire to be distributed in community publications. This impacts the findings: their final published study made it clear that *“it was difficult to directly ask about safeguarding issues as concepts such as abuse could not be mentioned. The term ‘personal safety’ was used instead, and ‘safeguarding’ referred to more generally in the focus groups.”*

### **What are the challenges or barriers faced by victims of honour-based abuse in seeking support or protection?**

Many victims of honour-based abuse in the Charedi community have no awareness that what they are experiencing is illegal. Even if they do, their social experience is entirely within their community of origin, and were they to report abuse, they risk losing their jobs, families, and social networks. They are also at risk of losing custody of their children<sup>4</sup>.

It is our experience that these difficulties are compounded by poor knowledge and understanding of HBA in Charedi communities, and the reluctance of social workers to challenge community gatekeepers. Further, those who do report abuse sometimes find themselves accompanied by ‘translators’ or ‘culturally appropriate supporters’ who play the role of community gatekeepers or proxies for community gatekeepers, creating a further risk that the individual reporting abuse will not feel able to be open about what has happened to them.

### **How would you assess the police response to honour-based abuse? How could it be improved?**

As with other agencies, the Police do not have adequate understanding and appreciation of the risk of HBA in Charedi communities. Police are slow to act to warning signs of risk and do not react to victim’s perception of risk.

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Social Justice, 2022 – [No honour in abuse: Harnessing the health service to end domestic abuse](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ana Zuriaga, 2022 - [A partnership approach to supporting the health and wellbeing of the Charedi \(Orthodox Jewish\) community in London](#)

<sup>3</sup> Jonny Wineberg and Dr Sandi Mann, 2015 - [Salford Jewish Community Health Research Report 2015](#)

<sup>4</sup> BBC, 2016 - [Scare the mother, save the child.](#)

In our experience, police response to HBA in Charedi communities tends to be ‘one size fits all’, aimed at, so-called, ‘target hardening’ and the reduction of risk to life. There does not seem to be more help beyond the standard finger-printing, and the offer to arrange an FMPO. Whilst these responses are vital, and the Police understandably are trying to identify the victims who are at the highest risk of lethal harm, a broader response is needed to mitigate harms that do not meet the threshold of risk to life. Currently, the Police are failing to protect those experiencing the ongoing grind of HBA where women are harassed, spat on, followed, forced to move home, lose their jobs, and are forced to defend malicious and frivolous legal action.

We are also concerned that preventative work is not being done within the Charedi community by other agencies outside the police, in a way that mitigates and reduces the risk of HBA.

### **Is the current law in relation to honour-based abuse adequate to protect victims? If not, what should change?**

Honour-based abuse is a community problem. Problematic attitudes towards honour and shame are fostered by communities in public spaces such as schools, places of worship, and places of religious study. The concept of honour depends on the perception of the private individual by others in the public sphere, and we argue that it is those ‘others’ who must be responded to, to eradicate HBA. Therefore, we must move away from searching for private solutions to what are actually public problems.

Further, it is unreasonable to put the responsibility for building safer communities on individual victims of abuse. Requiring those with the least power to bear highest personal cost in eradicating HBA is wrong.

An appropriate understanding of the context of HBA must be better integrated into statutory working practices, such as social work, education, and the regulation of charities. This reform would tip the focus from a criminal justice response which relies on the victim having the confidence to support a prosecution, to a proactive response that requires those working in communities to improve their practice.

### **What are the challenges for services supporting victims of honour-based abuse? How could those challenges be mitigated or overcome?**

It is essential that those experiencing HBA can access refuges that will meet their needs, allowing them to leave risky, high-control environments where they are experiencing HBA. In our experience the needs of Charedi victims of HBA are not being well met by the current offer. Funding is needed to better understand these needs and to ensure those needs can be met.

Case study: Miriam, 18, is at risk of forced marriage. She reaches out to Nahamu through a friend of a friend. Nahamu explain that they are not a service organisation, and signpost to local women’s aid organisations, and the local authority. Each of these services advise that Miriam needs to secure an FMPO. She is terrified of reporting her family situation to anyone and does not feel that the people she speaks to can relate to her experience or understand the pressure she is under. She finds the only solution offered is “all or nothing”. A social worker tries to insist that an FMPO means she can stay at home – Miriam protests that she will be disowned if her parents find out she has told outsiders about what she is experiencing at home. She has limited secular education and doesn’t feel she can manage in the outside world on her own. She goes ahead with

the proposed marriage.

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